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Chicks Who Make Flicks
The Effect of Blockbusters By, For, and About Women
By Clare Reynders

A Media Studies Senior Project
Vassar College
Advisor: Dara Greenwood
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I. Introduction

There are all kinds of television shows and movies about women, but how many of them make women recognizable? ¹ - Roxane Gay, *Girls Girls Girls*

It is no secret that there is a dearth of representation of women in Hollywood films, both behind and in front of the camera. In a media industry that has always put men first, society has trouble situating films made about women within the Hollywood canon. No matter what these films accomplish, they run into criticism. For example, one of the most popular “chick flicks” in the past decade is *Bridesmaids*, but critical reactions to the film demonstrate just how fraught female-centric films are in the cultural eye. On popular review aggregation site *Rotten Tomatoes*, *Bridesmaids* has earned a “certified fresh” 89%, as well as a critical consensus describing it as a, “female-driven comedy that refuses to be boxed in.” ² However, many critics felt that the film was leaning too hard into masculine tropes; as a critic in *Women’s Voices for Change* wrote, *Bridesmaids* consists of, “very talented women emulating a style that is more genuine to men.” ³ When the film is not being criticized for not being feminist or original enough, positive reviews are sure to distance the film from feminized genres. *Wall Street Journal* critic Joe Morgenstern writes, “If this is only a chick flick, then call me a chick.” ⁴ Although this is a positive response to the film, it is representational of critics’ need to distance a film that they deem high-quality, like *Bridesmaids*, from the “chick flick” and romantic comedy genres, which are thereby implied to be low-quality. The theatrical release poster even states, in big pink letters, “chick flicks don’t

¹ Roxane Gay, “Girls Girls Girls,” *The Rumpus*, May 3, 2012, <https://therumpus.net/2012/05/girls-girls-girls/>.

² “Bridesmaids: Critical Consensus,” *Rotten Tomatoes*, accessed April 15, 2019, https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/bridesmaids_2011/.

³ Alexandra Macaaron, “Movie Review: Bridesmaids,” *Women’s Voices for Change*, published June 13, 2011, <https://womensvoicesforchange.org/movie-review-bridesmaids.htmhttps://womensvoicesforchange.org/movie-review-bridesmaids.htm>.

⁴ Joe Morgenstern, “Bridesmaids Catches the Bouquet,” published May 13, 2011, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703864204576318930764862552>.

have to suck!”⁵, another backhanded compliment that validates the film by distancing it from the negativity associated with its genre. In short, women’s films are viewed and judged by a society so dominated by men that critics and audiences are confronted with a crisis of interpretation – if the structures of representation associated with the male gaze are not applicable to films made for women (or even by women), then what is the appropriate alternative? In these first two chapters, I examine “chick flicks” and the female gaze (or the work of female directors) separately, before putting them in conversation with each other in order to complicate both topics and investigate them on a deeper level. As I will demonstrate in the next two chapters, two separate discourses have crystallized around the keywords “chick flick” and “female gaze,” and it would be unhelpful to try to evaluate films that exist in just one of these categories. However, bridging the study of female filmmakers with the study of films with assumed female viewers will mobilize these discourses into helpful tools for understanding what these sorts of films accomplish.

Before discussing films made by and about women, it is necessary to establish the fact that women are disadvantaged in the film industry, both behind and in front of the camera, through concrete data and examples. This inequity lays the groundwork for women’s experience in filmmaking and contributes to their work. In 2002’s *Women’s Cinema: The Contested Screen*, Alice Butler traces women’s cinema all the way from women’s films of the studio era, such as *Gone with the Wind*, *All About Eve*, and *Jezebel*, to modern-day chick flicks, such as *Clueless*, *13 Going on 30*, and *The Devil Wears Prada*. She asserts that, “as few as fourteen films were directed by only seven women in mainstream Hollywood between 1949 and 1979, the increased

⁵ “Bridesmaids Theatrical Release Poster,” 2011, Image retrieved from <https://www.ebay.com/itm/Bridesmaids-original-DS-movie-poster-D-S-27x40-FINAL-/311976512361>, accessed April 15 2019.

numbers of the last decade not only look like but actually constitute exponential growth, while falling far short of equality.”⁶ Women were practically excluded altogether from the industry until the eighties, when the medium and its practices had already crystalized, barely leaving any room for women to enter. In the present day, the statistics about women behind the camera are not much better. A 2013 study by Women in Film and the Sundance Institute questioned thirty four industry leaders, 85% women, who worked in the film industry about perceptions and hiring practices in relation to gender. It revealed that, “implicit biases that favor male qualities in directing may be ingrained, unconscious, and problematic...First, women are not attributed leadership ability because traits associated with leaders or directors are more stereotypically masculine. Second, when women are leaders, they must model masculine leadership traits. In doing so, female leaders must deviate from expected gender roles. A woman acting against societal gender norms may experience negative consequences.”⁷ Through this study, Sundance demonstrated and concluded that directing, as well as other leadership roles on film sets, was associated with masculine qualities. Because of this, Sundance found that, “women have not made great strides as independent narrative filmmakers. Although the percentage of women directors in the SFF Dramatic Competition reached a record high of 50% in 2013, the overall percentage of narrative female directors across 12 years at SFF is 17.1%. This lack of parity extends to other production roles, especially executive producers and producers at SFF.”⁸

Through viewing Sundance as a microcosm of the film industry as a whole, and probably a more

⁶ Alison Butler, *Women's Cinema: The Contested Screen*, (London: Wallflower, 2002), 27.

⁷ Stacy Smith, Katherine Piper, Marc Choueiti, “Exploring the Barriers and Opportunities for Independent Women Filmmakers Phase I and II,” Sundance Institute and Women in Film Los Angeles, January 20, 2014, <http://www.sundance.org/pdf/artist-programs/wfi/phase-i-ii-research---exploring-the-barriers.pdf>.

⁸ Ibid

progressive version at that, it becomes clear that women are far from being as respected as men in these leadership roles.

Women in Film conducted another study with Sundance in order to explore how the gender of the director affected a film's distribution and opportunities for release. This report found that, "the director gender gap is at its widest in top-grossing films. Across 1,300 top-grossing films from 2002 to 2014, only 4.1 percent of all directors (n=59 of 1,433) were female. This calculates into a gender ratio of 23.3 male directors to every 1 female director."⁹ Similarly, when the ACLU launched an investigation into sexism in Hollywood's hiring practices, they found that, "only 1.9% of directors of the top-grossing 100 films of 2013 and of 2014 were women."¹⁰ These numbers are hard to ignore, and make it clear that financially successful female directors are an exception to the rule. This imbalance is enforced in festivals and in the industry in general when it comes to distribution opportunities; according to the same Sundance study, "the majority of companies distributing movies by female directors have fewer financial resources and lower industry clout. This is the first clear evidence that a gendered marketplace intersects the careers of SFF male and female filmmakers in different ways."¹¹ Here, the Women in Film's research demonstrates that women have a harder time breaking into the industry and, even when they do, their films are less likely to be widely distributed. This

⁹ Stacy Smith, Katherine Piper, Marc Choueiti, "Exploring the Careers of Female Directors: Phase III," Female Filmmakers Initiative, April 21, 2015,

<http://www.sundance.org/pdf/artist-programs/wfi/phase-iii-research---female-filmmakers-initiative.pdf>.

¹⁰ Melissa Goodman, "ACLU Letter on the Exclusion of Women Directors," New York Times, May 12, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/05/12/movies/document-13filmwomen.html>.

¹¹ Stacy Smith, Katherine Piper, Marc Choueiti, "Exploring the Careers of Female Directors: Phase III," Female Filmmakers Initiative, April 21, 2015, <http://www.sundance.org/pdf/artist-programs/wfi/phase-iii-research---female-filmmakers-initiative.pdf>.

creates an institutional barrier between female voices and the audiences that they are hoping to reach.

This lack of representation behind the camera has a direct effect on the content of the films we watch. The Geena Davis Institute on Gender and Media has conducted multiple studies on this phenomenon. For example, they found that in 2015, “Male characters received two times the amount of screen time as female characters,” and, “male characters spoke two times as often as female characters in the top box office movies.”¹² This speaks to the overwhelming power of male creators and the male gaze in the film industry that is still pervasive today. The same study reports that representation has been getting slightly better in the recent years, but there is still a long way to go. They found that, “in 2007, 23.8% of leads were women compared to 30.1% in 2017, with a high of 33.3% in 2016.”¹³ Even with this vast improvement, male leads still outnumber female leads by more than half. Additionally, these numbers don’t even take race into account. The institute found that, “white leads outnumbered leads of color four-to-one in films from the past decade,” making it clear that the women of color are seen and heard even less on film. This on-screen discrepancy is a reflection of the gender imbalance behind the camera. But lack of representation is not the only negative side effect of the masculinity of the film industry; Rebecca Collins finds in her study *Content Analysis of Gender Roles in Media*, “how women and men are portrayed may be much more important than whether they are portrayed.”¹⁴ In this study, she finds that when women are portrayed in the media, they are often oversexualized and

¹² “The Reel Truth: Women Aren’t Seen or Heard: An Automated Analysis of Gender Representation in Popular Films,” Geena Davis Institute on Gender and Media, 2015, <https://seejane.org/research-informs-empowers/data>.

¹³ “The Geena Benchmark Report,” Geena Davis Institute on Gender and Media, 2019, <https://seejane.org/research-informs-empowers/the-geena-benchmark-report-2007-2017>.

¹⁴ Rebecca Collins, “Content Analysis of Gender Roles in Media: Where Are We Now and Where Should We Go?,” *Sex Roles* 64, no. 1 (2011): 295, DOI: 10.1007/s11199-010-9929-5.

fill stereotypically feminine, subordinate roles.¹⁵ This demonstrates the fact that women are not only underrepresented but also misrepresented in the medium of film, and female creators therefore must work within a framework that is stacked against them. How they choose to do this is completely unique to the individual, but my video essays will highlight women whose films, and the genres associated with them, are associated with the feminine in order to speak truth to female audiences.

The issue of female representation behind and in front of the camera has become a popular discussion in the cultural zeitgeist because the facts have become impossible to ignore. For example, in February of 2019, the viral #4PercentChallenge, a movement that encourages actors and studios to help increase the amount of female directors who direct studio films from 4%,¹⁶ was initiated by the Time's Up, a movement against sexual harassment and discrimination against women in Hollywood. Awareness of this dramatic statistic has prompted a large number of actors, producers, and directors, to work with female directors (or at least promise to). The cultural conversation has recognized the importance of content made by and about women, highlighting the underrated cultural importance of these films.

This thesis will examine the genres that focus on women by adding a new dimension to the ongoing academic conversation surrounding women's films (or "chick flicks"). I would like to put the academic work on women's films in conversation with the work that has been done on female auteurs. In doing so, women audiences are put in conversation with women creators, adding a new level of exploration to our current understanding of chick flicks. My reclaimed

¹⁵ Rebecca Collins, "Content Analysis of Gender Roles in Media: Where Are We Now and Where Should We Go?," *Sex Roles* 64, no. 1 (2011): 295, DOI: 10.1007/s11199-010-9929-5.

¹⁶ Rachel Feldman, "What the #4PercentChallenge to Women Directors Needs to Succeed," *Variety*, February 7, 2019, <https://variety.com/2019/film/news/4percentchallenge-how-it-can-succeed-1203131316>.

definition of “chick flick” refers to films made for female audiences. I will examine how the perception of films in these feminized genres is affected by the gender of their auteurs. When women purposefully make films for and about women, they have the unique opportunity to breathe truth into stories about women, who are so often misrepresented.

II. The Female Gaze

Of course, in order to engage with the gaze, I have to begin with Laura Mulvey’s *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. This seminal 1975 essay is the origin of male gaze theory. Here, Mulvey establishes the concept of the active male gaze and the passive female object. According to her, this dichotomy is ingrained in film as a medium, as men have been the viewers while women have been looked at since the beginning of film.¹⁷ This concept is important to start with because cultural conversation about the female gaze, as demonstrated above, is centered around the existence of the male gaze. The male gaze derives from social structures in which films were produced by and for men, the female gaze must necessarily arise from alternative social structures and creative processes. When female directors are creating films for female audiences, or for the female gaze, their films are able to exist outside this construct that Mulvey and Berger deemed universal.

My definition of “the female gaze” exists in films made by, for, and about women. According to Mulvey, the cinematic apparatus has been designed and molded by men, so the very medium is masculine and often objectifies women. She writes that, “woman, then, stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent

¹⁷ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *The Gender and Media Reader*, ed. Mary Celeste Kearney (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012).

image of a woman still tied to her place as the bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning.”¹⁸ As Mulvey establishes, women have historically been the subjects of films while men have been the directors and creators. Her famous theory highlights the fact that the creators and viewers of films have historically been men. In the book “Feminist Film Theorists,” author Shohini Chaudhuri discusses the many reactions to Mulvey’s foundational theory, including questions as to where female spectators fit in. Here, Chaudhuri explores the theories of Mary Ann Doane, who recognizes that femininity is socially constructed, and when female spectators realize this, it becomes easier for them to watch and critique films constructed through the male gaze.¹⁹ This relocates the woman from bearer of meaning to maker of meaning. There is no one definition of the female gaze, as all women differ in how they choose to tell stories on screen. However, this thesis is centering films that locate women as authors of their own identities.

A few years before Mulvey’s essay was published, art critic John Berger published the seminal 1972 book *Ways of Seeing*. His ideas lay the groundwork for Mulvey’s points; although he is discussing paintings, his argument can just as easily be applied to the medium of film.

Much like Mulvey, he writes that,

“in the art-form of the European nude the painters and spectator-owners were usually men and the persons treated as objects, usually women. This unequal relationship is so deeply embedded in our culture that it still structures the consciousness of many women. They do to themselves what men do to them. They survey, like men, their own femininity.”²⁰

Berger’s point dovetails nicely with Mulvey’s, highlighting the fact that the male gaze is inextricably embedded into our culture and into artistic mediums themselves (from paintings to

¹⁸ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *The Gender and Media Reader*, ed. Mary Celeste Kearney (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012), 61.

¹⁹ Shohini Chaudhuri, *Feminist Film Theorists* (London: Routledge, 2006).

²⁰ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London, UK: Penguin Books, 1972), 63.

films). He also recognizes the idea that female creators are often trapped inside this apparatus, making it difficult for them to exercise their own gaze when their chosen medium is so inextricably linked with the male gaze. However, when women auteurs are able to create films that are undeniably about and for women, they are removed enough from the male gaze that they are able to re-situate the act of female representation outside the apparatus of the male gaze. In her essay *The Oppositional Gaze*, bell hooks writes that, “black women were able to critically assess the cinema’s construction of white womanhood as object of phallogentric gaze and choose not to identify with either the victim or the perpetrator...mainstream feminist film criticism in no way acknowledges black female spectatorship.”²¹ Race is a vital aspect of the gaze that is often overlooked; the male gaze is also intrinsically white. Unfortunately, in order to engage with texts that have the maximum amount of impact on the largest audience, my case studies are looking into women directors whose films have experienced a great deal of box office success, which happen to only include films by white women. Just last year, Ava DuVernay became the first black woman to direct a hundred million dollar film,²² highlighting the racism that, much like sexism, is ingrained in the Hollywood apparatus. Even so, hooks provides a vital understanding of what it is to exist outside the male gaze, something many female directors are doing at least partially.

The concept of the female gaze is rooted in auteur theory. In Chaudhuri’s book, she references Kaja Silverman’s work, which exists in opposition to Barthes’ “Death of the Auteur.” In Roland Barthes’ 1969 essay, he states that, “the reader has never been the concern of classical

²¹ bell hooks, “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators,” in *The Gender and Media Reader*, ed. Mary Celeste Kearney (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012), 605.

²² Yohana Desta, “Ava DuVernay Is First Black Female Director to Helm a \$100 Million Film,” *Vanity Fair*, August 2, 2016, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2016/08/ava-duvernay-budget-record#~o>.

criticism...we must reverse its myth: the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author.”²³ Barthes argues that the author of a text (the director, in the medium of film) is unimportant, and the reader’s interpretation is actually what matters. However, Silverman asserts that it *does* matter who is speaking, especially because women were silenced for so many years in the film industry.²⁴ The concept of the director as the singular auteur may be outdated, but female filmmakers are working within an industry that has historically been structured around male filmmakers, making the auteur’s identity an important aspect of the work that they create. Judith Mayne’s 1990 book, *The Woman at the Keyhole*, provides more analysis of the female auteur and the history of feminist film criticism. Importantly, in the chapter entitled “Female Authorship Reconsidered,” she discusses the historical reluctance to refer to a female tradition, or a canon of films by women, as there has never been enough content by women to measure against mainstream films made by and for men. She then goes on to push back against a common criticism that has been leveled throughout history at theorists’ attempts to study the film genres that this thesis examines.

“The reluctance to speak of a ‘female tradition’ has perhaps been most influenced, however, by the fear of essentialism- the fear that is, that any discussion of ‘female texts’ presumes the uniqueness and autonomy of female representation, thus validating rather than challenging the dualism of patriarchal hierarchy. However, the act of discarding the concept of female authorship and of an attendant female tradition in the cinema as necessarily compromised by essentialist definitions of woman can be equally dualistic, in assuming that the only models of connection and influences are unquestionably essentialist ones”²⁵

Here, Mayne acknowledges the essentialist trap that discussions about female auteurs can often fall into; She enforces the idea that not all women share the same perspective, while at the same

²³ Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1978), 145.

²⁴ Shohini Chaudhuri, *Feminist Film Theorists*, (London: Routledge, 2006).

²⁵ Judith Mayne, *The Woman at the Keyhole*, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 97.

time highlighting the importance of investigating the female tradition. Through examining films by female directors that also speak directly to the female experience and exist within genres that are associated with women, I will attempt to avoid essentializing and stereotyping female creators. Instead, the concept of female authorship and, therefore, a female tradition, will be examined through individual creators and their distinct contributions to this tradition. Mayne also pushes back against critics who dismiss auteur theory. Although auteur theory has become slightly obsolete, Mayne concludes that, “the notion of female authorship is not simply a useful political strategy; it is crucial to the reinvention of the cinema that has been undertaken by women filmmakers and feminist spectators.”²⁶ In exploring contemporary blockbuster films like *Twilight*, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, *Something’s Gotta Give*, and *It’s Complicated*, I will honor Mayne’s theory and attempt to align auteur theory with women’s cinema now that there is a large enough catalogue to examine. My methodology will be to present successful female directors in conversation with how audiences, critics, and the culture as a whole interacted with them. Although both have individually been studied extensively, only by putting the female gaze in conversation with chick flicks/women’s films can we understand the untapped feminist potential of these films. A film involves more than just form and content- it exists as a dialogue between creator and viewer via representations of particular subject matter.

Recently, the concept of the female gaze has been relevant in the cultural zeitgeist, despite being difficult to define. In a 2017 article in *Film Quarterly* about the female gaze, journalist Caetlin Benson-Allott discusses the trend of women-centric television in the modern era. According to her, “as for the female gaze, well, even [Jill] Soloway admits that ‘there really

²⁶ Judith Mayne, *The Woman at the Keyhole*, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 96.

is no such thing, not yet.’’²⁷ As this article suggests, there is no cultural consensus on what the female gaze is. Benson-Allott mentions female creators and female characters, but the presence of just one of those is not enough to connote a film that truly demonstrates the female gaze. Additionally, it cannot be claimed that gender identity is automatically a surrogate for perspective.

In the summer of 2018, many popular publications began to attempt to define the female gaze, prompted by a Lincoln Center film festival inspired by the concept. If there’s one thing that this coverage demonstrates, it is the fact that the female gaze has no universal definition. In a discussion of the festival for *The Atlantic*, David Sims writes about the films featured, all with female directors or cinematographers.

“‘There’s no simplistic unifying quality to these films. What brings the works together is a little more amorphous: how refreshing and original their perspectives on each world feel. ‘There are lots of sexualized images in these movies ... but I think there’s a different quality to the power relationship between subject and object,’ [Madeline] Whittle, [program director at Lincoln Center] told me.’’²⁸

Here, Madeline Whittle implies that, just as there is a male gaze, there could be an intrinsically “female” gaze with measurable qualities. Rather than just existing where the male gaze doesn’t, some journalists find that the female gaze is its own aesthetic entirely because of women’s different, more complicated relationship to the camera and the film industry. Whittle finds that the female gaze does not try to dominate the subject, but instead looks at everything in a more tactile and egalitarian way. In the same vein, through interviews with many of the female

²⁷ Caetlin Benson-Allott, “No Such Thing, Not Yet: Questioning Television’s Female Gaze,” *Film Quarterly* (Winter 2017), 65-71.

²⁸ David Sims, “The Value of the ‘Female Gaze’ in Film,” *The Atlantic*, August 02, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/08/female-gaze-lincoln-center-series-women-cinematographers/566612/>.

filmmakers showcased at the festival, *Vulture*'s Tori Telfer finds that the female gaze is, "emotional and intimate. It sees people as people. It seeks to empathize rather than to objectify. (Or not.) It's respectful, it's technical, it hasn't had a chance to develop, it tells the truth, it involves physical work, it's feminine and unashamed, it's part of an old-fashioned gender binary, it should be studied and developed, it should be destroyed, it will save us, it will hold us back."²⁹

It is a very conceptually charged notion; some of the directors interviewed believe that the female gaze is the future, while some of them believe it only reinforces the gender binary.

Although there are a myriad of opinions in the cultural conversation about the female gaze, themes of realism, emotionality, and non-objectification of characters are often present. Director Kirsten Johnson puts it best when she says,

"besides being up to its own devices, a female-centric gaze is also informed, moved, and provoked by the overwhelmingly male histories of gazing that have long taken up more than their fair share of space. With this world saturated in male-imagined imagery, it takes some of us years to understand that it is possible to see differently, that aspiring to express what is singular to us has great value, and that while the specificity of our images may strike some as unfamiliar, this is not a sign of failure of craft, but a mark of triumph in a landscape in which our visibility is so rare."³⁰

According to Johnson, the female gaze is important to acknowledge because the film-watching and film-making experiences are so influenced by the male gaze that it's important to recognize and understand when people break out of that hegemonic mold. As I will go on to discuss, this mold is most often broken when female directors know that they are speaking directly to female audiences.

²⁹ Tori Telfer, "How Do We Define the Female Gaze in 2018," *Vulture*, August 2, 2018, <https://www.vulture.com/2018/08/how-do-we-define-the-female-gaze-in-2018.html>.

³⁰ Ibid.

In all of these interviews, a few things become clear about the female gaze. First, it's a fraught and contradictory phrase, that is known mainly for what it's not: the male gaze. Secondly, it's intrinsically linked to the ideas and perspectives of female auteurs. I will explore some of these creators in depth, and their relationship to their work and their audiences. The following case studies will use stereotypically feminine genres to examine the concept of the female gaze, triangulated through female creators, subjects, and spectators. This analysis will help to demonstrate the value of women's role behind, in front of, and beyond the camera. When women are the focus in all three of these categories, it creates a unique circumstance, because men are usually more prominent in all of these areas. These case studies will focus on films through which women explore different aspects of femininity through their own personal lenses. No two women see the world in the exact same way, so by exploring different examples, it will highlight the idea that there is no *single* female gaze. Instead, female perspectives have different things to say about femininity, together creating a complex portrayal of life as a woman. The perspectives contributed by female auteurs to the film medium are varied, valuable, and provide much-needed representation. Narratives that center around women are not specialized to one genre and are not niche; instead, female auteurs deliver a broad scope of representation to female audiences through their work. Different auteurs may speak more to certain aspects of femininity or exhibit different levels of feminist understanding, but their commitment to representing women and making content for women is what is feminist, to at least some small degree, about their work.

III. Chick Flicks

When auteurs speak directly to female audiences, these films are not often received well critically or academically, but provide a vital locus for women's representation on screen. Even the term that is used to describe these films about and for women, "chick flicks," holds a fraught place within popular culture and within the academy. In their aptly titled book *Chick Flicks: Contemporary Women at the Movies*, Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young define "chick flicks" as, "commercial films that appeal to a female audience."³¹ This is a broad definition that can be applied to many films, but beyond this relatively subjective definition, the genre has negative associations that cannot be ignored. As demonstrated by the wide array of criticisms leveled at *Bridesmaids* in the critical reviews, "Chick flicks are often accused of promoting a retreat into pre-feminist concerns and the unthinking embrace of consumerism"³² while at the same time being labeled as, "sappy movies for women that men don't like."³³ Cultural criticism does not allow the chick flick to exist without labeling it as low-brow, girlish, or unfeminist; "chick flick" has become somewhat of a derogatory term. It is also the only film genre that is so heavily gendered that womanhood is ingrained in its title – this is no coincidence. Simply by writing academically about chick flicks, Ferriss and Young are situating these films within an academic film history that has so often excluded them.

The romantic comedy genre is the face of the chick flick, and although it provides many great examples, women's films come in a large variety. In Roberta Garrett's 2007 text *Postmodern Chick Flicks: The Return of the Woman's Film*, she argues that the romantic comedy

³¹ *Chick Flicks: Contemporary Women at the Movies*, ed. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008), 4.

³² *Chick Flicks: Contemporary Women at the Movies*, ed. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008), 1.

³³ *Chick Flicks: Contemporary Women at the Movies*, ed. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008), 2.

became the primary genre for the women's film in the nineties because women were able to infuse feminist (and post-feminist) ideals into films that were seen as entirely within their domain.³⁴ In contemporary cinema, romantic comedies still occupy the majority of films in the women's domain, but more dramatic "event films" like have also begun to take up the "chick flick" mantle, with an increased focus on spectatorship. For example, Hilary Radner writes in *The New Woman's Film* that, "*Fifty Shades of Grey*, based on a successful book series, albeit with an older group of female readers, with its \$571,006,128 box office, constitutes what is colloquially termed 'a game changer' template for the further development of the new woman's film."³⁵ The box office success of films like these, made by and for women, is undeniable; women want to see stories told from a female perspective. In *Women's Genres*, Annette Kuhn writes that, "one of the defining generic features of the woman's picture as a textual system is its construction of narratives motivated by female desire and processes of spectatorship identification governed by female point-of-view."³⁶ This focus on the female perspective is at the core of what a chick flick really is- no matter the genre, it is a film that centers women.

The ever-expanding definition of what a chick flick is points to the idea that women have a shared cultural archive. In her 2008 book *The Female Complaint*, Lauren Berlant writes that,

"Women's culture' is one of the many flourishing intimate publics in the United States. An intimate public operates when a market opens up to a bloc of consumers, claiming to circulate texts and things that express those people's particular core interests and desires...Their participation seems to confirm the sense that even before there was a

³⁴ Roberta Garrett, *Postmodern Chick Flicks: The Return of the Woman's Film* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007)

³⁵ Hilary Radner, *The New Woman's Film: Femme-centric movies for smart chicks* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017), 184.

³⁶ Annette Kuhn, "Women's Genres: Melodrama, Soap Opera, and Theory," in *The Gender and Media Reader*, ed. Mary Celeste Kearney (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012), 593.

market addressed to them, there existed a world of strangers who would be emotionally literate in each other's experience of power, intimacy, desire, and discontent.”³⁷

Although Berlant's language focuses on the idea that women *feel* as though this is the case, it is also true that women's culture exists, most notably in the form of chick flicks. This sense of shared experience within the intimate public created by this archive of women's culture is vital; chick flicks connect with female audiences on a personal level and a communal level, speaking directly to specifically feminine experiences. Society constructs and defines what it means to be a woman, but in doing so it also opens up room for a woman's cultural archive through which women begin to define themselves.

The most popular films made by women are, similarly to most chick flicks made for women, often criticized as anti-feminist. From Nancy Meyers³⁸ movies to the *Twilight*³⁹ franchise, these films are commonly dismissed because, on the surface level, they don't seem like very complex stories about women. However, looking at popular women's films with the knowledge that women directors produce a uniquely feminine perspective will give films like these a chance at a deeper and more complex reading. While the most popular films directed by women are dismissed by the academy as anti-feminist because of some of their surface-level aspects, they deserve a more complex reading because the importance of the female perspective and gaze is underestimated. Ferriss and Young argue that not all “chick flicks” are feminist, and to view them as entirely feminist or anti-feminist ignores their complexity and multi-dimensionality.⁴⁰ Couching films like these in the history of the male gaze and women's

³⁷ Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 5.

³⁸ Alexandra Macon, “Is Nancy Meyers's New Movie *The Intern* Sexist?,” *Vogue*, October 5, 2015, <https://www.vogue.com/article/nancy-meyers-the-intern-sexist>.

³⁹ David Cox, “Twilight: the franchise that ate feminism,” *The Guardian*, July 12, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2010/jul/12/twilight-eclipse-feminism>.

⁴⁰ *Chick Flicks: Contemporary Women at the Movies*, ed. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young

films disrupts the modern understanding that they are not feminist enough. Women's films should be neither presumed feminist vehicles nor ignored for their potential significance. These "chick flicks" made by women are not inherently feminist in their content. Rather, the feminist potential of a woman making a film about and for women is significantly underestimated. Extending beyond an analysis of form and content in order to examine the socio-historical context and reception of specific films made by, about, and for women will illuminate their feminist potential. Placing creator, viewer, and subject in conversation with one another is my attempt to intervene against the nature of how these films are received and apply a new methodology to viewing this specific type of women's film.

IV. In Conversation

From Mulvey to today, there has been a great deal of scholarship and popular press covering the female gaze, female authorship, auteur theory, the concept of women's film, and chick flicks. However, there is a strong connection between female auteurs and women's films across genre, and analyzing its existence takes these conversations a step further. Many of the theorists brought into conversation earlier in this paper have discussed either the female gaze and women as auteurs *or* "chick flicks" and films made with female audiences in mind. Bringing those two topics into conversation, highlights female auteurs' unique ability to communicate directly and empathetically to female audiences. As Michelle Citron writes in *Women's Film Production: Going Mainstream*, "most women directors working in Hollywood have been confined to traditional women's genres such as melodrama or comedy. Few have been allowed to direct detective films, thrillers, or science fiction, genres which are 'male' as well as more

(New York, NY: Routledge, 2008).

expensive to produce.”⁴¹ This “confinement,” although harmful for the careers of many women directors, has carved out a space for women in Hollywood that exists outside the male gaze; when women make films for women, something unique is achieved.

In order to analyze this intersection and demonstrate its importance, the case studies will focus on certain auteurs, genres, and films that demonstrate it. These genres will be examined through two video essays, each focusing on a different female auteur (or two). The texts examined in these essays will all be directed towards women and follow protagonists who are women. These essays will focus on the individual ways that each director connects with female audiences. This is the best medium through which to convey my case studies, because video essays are often very watchable, shareable, and digestible. These videos will be informed by the theoretical work of this essay, but ideally they will also be detachable, able to stand on their own as individual discussions of popular auteurs. They will also, ideally, be accessible to general audiences, able to contribute to this thesis but also able to inform and entertain any viewer. This medium will ideally support the themes of cultural importance through encoding and decoding by placing the focus on a large audience. Stuart Hall’s 1973 piece *Encoding and Decoding* will provide the theoretical media studies framework to explain the connection between female creators and audiences. Hall discusses the disparity between the creator of a piece of media and the way it is decoded by audiences.⁴² As the auteur encodes and the audience decodes, Hall demonstrates the journey that media content goes through and how it is affected by who

⁴¹ Michelle Citron, “Women’s Film Production: Going Mainstream,” in *The Gender and Media Reader*, ed. Mary Celeste Kearney (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012), 170.

⁴² Stuart Hall, “Encoding and Decoding in Television Discourse,” in *Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies: Cultural, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies* (London: Hutchinson, 1973).

consumes or creates it. These videos place an examination of audience and reception in conversation with an examination of authorship and the gaze.

These videos will also problematize the notion that “female director” is a blanket statement, as the presence of a woman in the director’s chair does not render a film feminist automatically. Instead, they will focus on women auteurs who center their projects around women and different aspects of femininity. The variety among these creators will help illustrate my point: Women have an endless array of perspectives to offer on film, and by making films about and for women, these creators take the opportunity to make room for real women in a medium that so often objectifies them. Each uses the medium of film to contribute something unique to the lives of female viewers. The videos will also explore cultural reaction and reception to these films, along with the auteur’s place in the zeitgeist. These video essays will also include, when available, interviews from the perspective of the auteurs, in order to provide the perspective of the women “encoding” the stories. The presence of women behind the camera on blockbuster “chick flicks” is important because it provides representation and complicates a viewer’s perception of the film when they know it is a woman’s perspective being shown.

In the first video essay, I would like to focus on a person and genre that many theorists on this topic have gravitated towards: Nancy Meyers and the romantic comedy. This is the landmark genre within the greater chick flick umbrella, and Nancy Meyers has been established as one of the most financially and commercially successful romantic comedy auteurs. This individual essay will explore the romantic comedy genre through Meyers’ filmography. This essay will also explore the romantic comedy’s potential to provide positive and complex representation for women. This video will investigate Meyers’ directorial style, and her reception in academia and

cultural criticism. Looking at how Meyers' films, and Meyers herself, are received alongside the actual content of her films will demonstrate the strong connection between auteur and audience. Lastly, Meyers's films will be compared with romantic comedies by men such as Judd Apatow, specifically when it comes to audience reactions. This comparison will demonstrate how romantic comedies are perceived when directed by women versus men.

The next video essay will examine Catherine Hardwicke's *Twilight* and Sam Taylor-Johnson's *Fifty Shades of Grey*. These blockbusters fall under the genre of romance and erotica, and the essay will examine the female gaze on female sexuality. These films are known for their largely female fan-bases, which affects how they are received by larger audiences. Additionally, these films will be put into conversation with Hardwicke and Taylor-Johnson's careers; both of them were practically shut out of the industry after directing these box-office hits. Although films like these play into sexist stereotypes, is there anything intrinsically feminist about them? Why are these two of the biggest blockbusters women have been able to direct? This video essay will explore sexuality, female fandom, and what happens when women direct popular films through the female gaze.

The fact that I am analyzing popular, blockbuster films in both of these video essays is no coincidence. As demonstrated by the *Women in Film* studies, women are more often associated with independent, low-budget film. Therefore, when a woman makes a big film, it is often brushed off or not included under the umbrella of the female gaze. As Deborah Jermyn writes in *Women do Genre in Film and Television*,

“While other women directors broadly of her generation such as Chantal Akerman, Sally Potter, and Jane Campion have now been the subject of numerous detailed studies, Meyers is instead a Hollywood director, making very popular films in familiar genres in an enduringly dominant classical film style, and, furthermore, the very style which

feminist criticism has most vigorously rejected as hopelessly compromised by patriarchal interests, ideology, and practices.”⁴³

These video essays will demonstrate that popular Hollywood films are not always “hopelessly compromised” by the male gaze. Rather, women auteurs like Meyers, Taylor-Johnson, and Hardwicke work outside of the male gaze by putting their own female gazes in conversation with chick-flick genres. It is necessary to analyze popular Hollywood films, not just subversive independent ones, in order to understand the greater cultural effect that these films are capable of having. Meyers and Hardwicke are some of the most financially successful women directors ever, but why are they not recognized for it? And how do they handle this power? By synthesizing analysis of women’s roles behind and in front of the camera, these video essays will complicate their films as sites of representation.

These video essays will address many questions about the nature of women as auteurs and their relationship to the women’s film. Is the “chick flick” empowering or disempowering? Many might recoil at the term, but when “chick flicks” are directed by women, they provide an essential perspective for women audiences. These films unite an audience around a shared embodied experience that the director is a part of, creating a closed loop, a more seamless journey from the encoded to the decoded. These essays will hopefully answer many questions that come up concerning this topic. How do films with women behind, in front of, and beyond the camera represent women and men? What are the consequences of associating gender and genre? How do the genres of romantic comedy and romance/erotica demonstrate the female gaze in distinct ways? Through these genres, will differences between the female gaze and the male

⁴³ Deborah Jermyn, “The Contemptible Realm of the Rom-Com Queen,” in *Women Do Genre in Film and Television*, ed. Mary Harrod and Katarzyna Paszkiewicz (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 60.

gaze become clear? Or are these labels obsolete? What can examining films with this three-fold representation of women tell us about the importance of the female perspective? As film critic Alicia Malone asks in her popular compilation of reviews entitled *The Female Gaze*, “what happens, for example, when we look at the world from a female point of view? How do women see themselves? How do women see other women? What makes a movie essentially feminine? What can audiences of any gender identification gain by looking at film through a female lens?”⁴⁴ Although much of the literature explores one of these areas, from specific female directors and how they subvert the male gaze to female agency within film to the unique nature of female spectatorship, no one has quite delved into all three working in tandem.

V. [Case Study I: Nancy Meyers \(link\)](#)

VI. [Case Study II: Catherine Hardwicke & Sam Taylor-Johnson \(link\)](#)

VII. Conclusion

These videos break new ground by demanding more from the content that is examined and from its critics. Most modern films are by, about, and for men, but are seemingly “neutral.” Perhaps somewhere along the way there are female voices present, but it’s rare for women to be as strongly represented in all three areas as they are in romantic blockbusters like *Twilight* or Nancy Meyers’ rom-coms. These videos examined films and creators that represent this idea, each in their own unique way, in order to dig deeper into what representation really means and what it is capable of doing. The concept of “representation” of women and minority groups on

⁴⁴ Alicia Malone, *The Female Gaze* (Miami, FL: Mango Publishing, 2018), 10.

film is discussed often in the cultural zeitgeist, and these videos began to explore and demonstrate why it's so important. When female audiences are spoken to in a genuine way, not through films men think or hope they would like, but through films made with female fantasy in mind, they succeed. These directors utilize the female gaze and uniquely feminine fantasies to speak directly to women, a rare occurrence in a cultural industry that is so dominated by the male gaze. They are certainly not alone: directors like Zoe Lister-Jones have begun to hire all-female crews for their films,⁴⁵ recognizing the positive effect of women behind the scenes. Women like Lister-Jones, Nancy Meyers, Catherine Hardwicke, and Sam-Taylor Johnson each offer a unique perspective on what life is like as a woman. No one perspective is correct, perfect, or purely feminist. Instead, by analyzing and comparing their perspectives, the benefit of representing female voices in popular Hollywood cinema becomes clear. In *Neo-Feminist Cinema*, Hilary Radner writes that,

“The girly film illustrates how popular culture for women may constitute a way of thinking about issues that might be called women’s issues outside the context of academic or political debate. The girly film in popular culture parallels the development of feminist theory in academia as a means of expressing and interrogating the terms of an evolving feminine identity in contemporary culture with, however, significantly more conservative outcomes.”⁴⁶

Through these video essays, I have taken Radner’s point a step further by highlighting the importance of women auteurs starting and participating in these conversations. By analyzing case studies Nancy Meyers, Catherine Hardwicke, and Sam Taylor-Johnson through their films *and* the cultural perception of their roles as auteurs, these videos demonstrate the importance of

⁴⁵ Kevin Lincoln, “Zoe Lister-Jones Made Her First Movie With an All-Female Crew,” *Vulture*, last modified June 2017, <https://www.vulture.com/2017/06/zoe-lister-jones-band-aid.html>

⁴⁶ Hilary Radner, *Neo-Feminist Cinema: Girly Films, Chick Flicks, and Consumer Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 31.

this connection between auteur and audience, encoder and decoder. If one thing becomes clear through these videos, it is that these women are systematically underappreciated by critics, academia, and audiences because of their femininity. These videos also show that directors like Meyers, Hardwicke, and Taylor-Johnson tell “chick flick” stories through the female gaze for women audiences, and that makes all the difference.

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